



Nutrition, Health, and Disease

As we grow older, there are life course choices that we can make to increase the likelihood that we will remain healthy and independent. Scientific studies have established that lifestyle choices—more than heredity—determine health, functioning, and vitality in later life. The 1988 Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health noted that two-thirds of all deaths are due to diseases associated with poor diets and dietary habits. Thus, what we eat significantly affects our health, our quality of life, and our longevity. Good nutrition is essential to maintaining cognitive and physical functioning. It plays an essential role in the prevention or management of many chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and osteoporosis. For minority older Americans who tend to have a higher incidence of chronic disease, this information is even more important to heed.

According to studies published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), unhealthful eating in combination with physical inactivity are risk behaviors that are responsible for at least 300,000, or 14%, of preventable deaths per year (JAMA, 1993, McGinnis). Only tobacco use causes more preventable deaths in the United States. Recent evidence indicates that good health may be extended and disability delayed by at least seven years if we stop smoking, maintain a weight appropriate for our height and body frame, and remain physically active.

The good news from all of these studies is that it is never too late for you to begin to make the right life course choices—to adopt a lifestyle that will promote a long, healthy, and independent life. There are many nutritious foods and many different physical activities from which you can choose. In fact, research indicates that as we age, we tend to make better food choices.



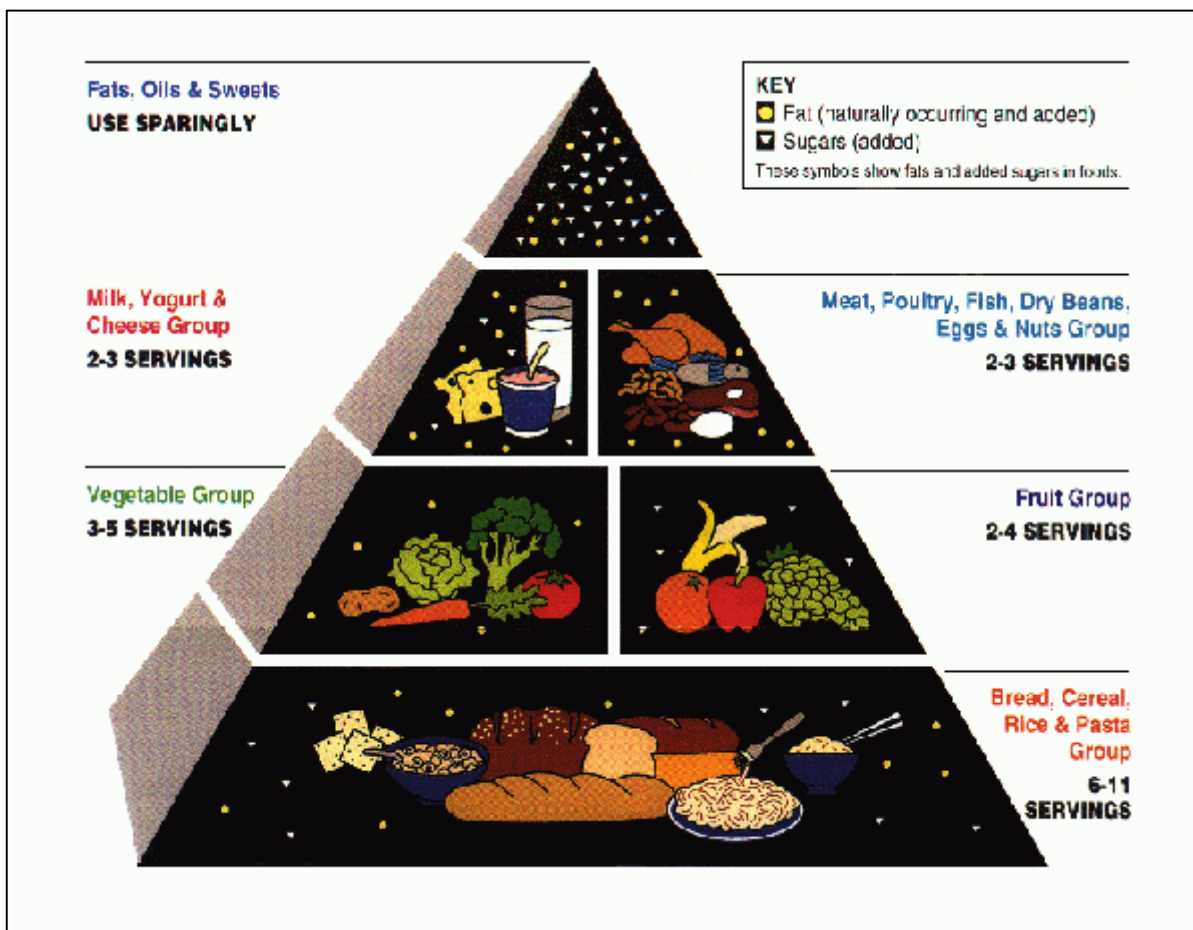
United States Dietary Guidelines

To help us make healthful food choices, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture recommend that we follow these guidelines:

- Eat a variety of foods.
- Balance the food you eat with physical activity—maintain or improve your weight.
- Choose a diet with plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits.
- Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
- Choose a diet moderate in sugars.
- Choose a diet moderate in salt and sodium.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.

The Food Guide Pyramid

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has developed the Food Guide Pyramid to show us what foods we need to eat for a healthful diet.



Using the Food Pyramid

Choose more foods from the lower part of the pyramid and fewer foods from the top of the pyramid. Choose at least six servings of grain products a day, preferably whole grain. A serving is a slice of bread or 1/2 cup of rice or pasta. Choose five servings of fruits and vegetables, especially those that are deeply or brightly colored. A serving is one small piece of fruit or 1/2 cup of cooked vegetable. Drink at least three 8-ounce glasses of milk or equivalents such as fortified soymilk per day. Choose about 4 to 6 ounces of lean meat, fish or poultry. Substitute 1/2 cup of cooked dried beans for 1 ounce of meat. Choose fewer high-fat foods and sweets. Although many older adults may need fewer calories, you still need to follow the food pyramid and eat foods that are rich in vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other healthy components. If you are a minority elder, you can eat familiar ethnic foods in the proportions suggested for the food groups by the pyramid. Because many older adults have a decreased sense of thirst, drinking at least six to eight glasses of liquids a day is important. The total should be a combination of water and liquid foods such as soup, milk, or juices.

The Elderly Nutrition Program

The Administration on Aging (AoA) promotes health and pursues disease prevention among older Americans through the Elderly Nutrition Program. The Elderly Nutrition Program helps older Americans build a foundation for health through improved diets, increased physical activity, and improved lifestyle choices. The Elderly Nutrition Program strives to provide:

- nutritious satisfying meals in community settings, such as senior centers, usually at noon, 5 days a week, in communities across the country;
- nutritious satisfying home-delivered meals, also known as Meals-on-Wheels, to homebound older adults, usually at noon, 5 days a week, in communities across the country;
- nutrition and health promotion education to improve health behaviors;
- nutrition counseling to help manage nutrition-related chronic diseases; and
- linkages to other supportive and health-related services, such as physical activity or fitness classes and health screenings.

All adults age 60 and over and their spouses of any age may receive services, provided that adequate funding for services exists and the services are not oversubscribed. Priority for the receipt of nutrition services is given to those who are in greatest economic or social need with particular attention to low-income, minority older adults. State data for Fiscal Year 1997 indicate that 113,147,407 congregate meals were provided to 2,083,294 older adults. Home-delivered nutrition services are provided to persons age 60 and older who are homebound

due to illness, disability, or geographic isolation. Recent state data indicate that in Fiscal Year 1997, approximately 123,455,162 home-delivered meals were provided to 890,489 homebound older adults.

Working in close partnership with its sister agencies in the Department of Health and Human Services, the Administration on Aging provides leadership, technical assistance, and support to the national aging network of 57 State Units on Aging, 655 Area Agencies on Aging, 225 Tribal and native organizations representing 300 American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal organizations and 2 organizations serving Native Hawaiians, plus thousands of service providers, adult care centers, caregivers, and volunteers.

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